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STUDIES IN THE WISDOM BOOKS OF THE INTERNATIONAL LESSONS.

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III. THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.

1. *Its General Characteristics.* Ecclesiastes is the third of the great "Wisdom" books which call for consideration in the scheme of the International Lessons. It differs not a little from Proverbs and Job both in form and contents. It is a prose work while they are poetical. Proverbs contains the simplest, if not the earliest, manifestation of that activity of the "wise men" which was occupied in the examination of social and individual life, and the search for principles of right living and their application. Job presents a single problem of human life in connection with a great historical crisis in Israel, the problem of suffering. Ecclesiastes has certain features in common with both these sides of Hebrew wisdom, but, different from Proverbs, its chief concern is with moral problems and difficulties, not with merely prudential considerations for common life, and it reaches out beyond the single topic which fills the horizon of the Book of Job. It comes nearest to being a speculative treatise, though it is not. It recounts the experience and conclusions of a man who was searching for a practical philosophy of living. He seeks by all the means in his power, through thought and action, in the midst of human society and in the depths of human intellect, to solve the riddle of the chief end of man, the meaning and purpose of human life, in order to be able to find thereby the way practically to get the most and best out of life. Here, as everywhere in Hebrew philosophy, the eye is fixed on purely practical ends.

2. *Analysis of the Book.* Ecclesiastes is almost incapable of analysis, as any one may prove either by reading it through or by comparing the results of commentators' attempts to furnish an analysis. The thoughts do not follow in apparent logical order and succession. Style and language alike aid in concealing the course of thought. The single expressions are often difficult to interpret. The style is harsh, the structure of the sentences often irregular. Some have concluded that we have the contents of a philosopher's note-book, set down in Emersonian fashion without connection, or more than a general relation. Others conjecture that the author died before the book received its last touches from him. These ideas merely express the difficulty found in tracing the order of thought from beginning to end. The book is the best

foundation for the arguments of those who maintain that Hebrew literature does not know the principles and rules of logical and orderly composition which we think indispensable to a literary production.

3. *The Title and Introduction.* The title states that the book contains the words of the son of David, King in Jerusalem. He is called *Koheleth*, a term to which various meanings have been attached. It is in Hebrew a feminine form apparently, and various attempts have been made to explain the gender. Some think of an indirect reference to wisdom, the feminine figure who plays so great a part in the early chapters of Proverbs. Perhaps the best explanation is based on the Arabic use of the feminine in a neuter sense to express the sum total, the highest point, of the qualities which the word denotes. Thus the son of David as *Koheleth* was all that a "Master of Assemblies" could be expected to be, he was the "Prince of preachers." Who is this son of David, King in Jerusalem? Tradition has recognized in him Solomon, the chief, the typical representative of the "wise men." Later scholarship has inferred from the contents of the book, its language and other things, that this tradition is not well founded. Whether that is true or not, it is certain that the writer, whoever he was, has brought Solomon forward as the centre about whom the thoughts of the book revolve. For our purpose the question is immaterial.

Most writers regard 1:2-11 as the introduction to the book. The opening words may be regarded as the motto of the subsequent utterances. They meet us not less than thirty-nine times in the book. "Everything is empty and fleeting. Man gets no result worth having from his labor (vs. 2, 3)." These are the fundamental thoughts. Notice the general point of view. It is man who stands in the foreground, not the Israelite; it is the "world under the sun," not Jerusalem—the standpoint of the "sages" always. To these two thoughts are added four illustrative or parallel statements:

- v. 4. Man passes away but nature remains the same.
- vs. 5-7. There is movement but no progress.
- vs. 8-10. There is labor but nothing new produced.
- v. 11. One's labor makes no impression on the future.

Nature and man alike move on and labor, but both go round the same circle—man not enjoying even the permanence of nature. Generation succeeds to generation, each consigning its predecessors to forgetfulness, while it journeys on over the same weary road.

This passage, with its solemn melancholy impressive eloquence, sums up at the beginning the writer's conclusions as to the general features of human life in the world.

4. *The Problem of Koheleth.* But he does not stop here. Such a view of things does not by any means paralyze his effort and activity. It stimulates him to the endeavor and the thought which he has recorded in the following pages. "On this basis," he asks "what is the practical rule of living, what is a man to do to make a success of life under these conditions?" Man is

here in such a world ; he lives ; he must do something ; he must find — not a speculative theory of the universe and human existence — but some workable practical method of making the best of it. Such is the problem of Ecclesiastes, the key to the book.

5. *Koheleth's Belief in God.* If such is man upon the earth, transitory and suffering, aspiring and not attaining, laboring and not achieving, living and must die, with no prospect of remembrance after death, surely it were well "to curse God and die." Can such anomalies of existence be reconciled with belief in God? This is the question which springs to our lips. The temptation in such a view of the world is to deny the existence or the presence of God in the earth. Strange as it seems to us, Koheleth is never once assailed by these questionings and doubts. He is no sceptic in the sense of denying Theism. A superficial reader of the book, with nineteenth century ideas, sometimes leaps to that inference, or at least theorizes about a progress of faith in God in the chapters culminating in the last. The inference and theory are both erroneous. It ought to be sufficient merely to go hastily through the chapters to discover how profound a belief in the existence and activity of God was possessed by the writer. What comes to man is from God ; he gives it ; men receive their portion from the hand of God. They are in his hands. He will judge, he proves them. All things are done by him. There are those that please him. Exalted as he is, he is deeply interested and active in the affairs of this earth. Because he is exalted, men should fear him.¹ Such remarkable ideas respecting God coupled with such a gloomy view of human life are extraordinary. This only can be suggested in explanation. The belief in God had become a part of the man's nature. He could not throw it off. He had no thought of throwing it off. Given God, as an element in the problem, as governor and arbiter of the race, the only matter which needed investigation and solution was the adjustment of one's life to the facts, the constitution of the world as God had evidently established it. Why he had so established it, how it reflected on his character and purposes, were problems that never seem to have crossed Koheleth's mind.

6. *The various unsatisfactory Solutions.* What is to be done? How is man to make the most of life? This is the practical problem. Various ways were tried by the writer, various conclusions arrived at, various theories put up as attempts to reach the satisfactory result. These attempts are not set down in order in the book. They must be gathered from a comparison of different passages and selected from much more or less irrelevant matter.

(1) Koheleth first tried to form a consistent theory of the universe through observation and inquiry into human activity.² Wisdom, in the sense of intellectual investigation, was the means employed. Well fitted as he was for this investigation, he found that the results were unsatisfactory. Inquiry did

¹ The student may find proof for these statements in 1:13; 2:24; 2:26; 3:10-14; 3:17; 5:2, 7, 18; 7:13,14,26; 8:12; 9:1; 11:9, etc.

² 1:13.

not make man happy ; it increased his dissatisfaction.¹ Another attempt was made, through another kind of "wisdom," with better success.² Koheleth no longer tried to form a speculative theory, he fell back on practical wisdom, the results of wise observation of moral conduct. Such was the teaching of the "sages" in Israel. They saw how much nearer the reality of things one came in the house of mourning.³ They perceived the value of sound judgment in a counsellor.⁴ Koheleth utters some very useful maxims respecting the details of practical life. Wisdom has taught him that wickedness is folly and righteousness is life.⁵ But it could not lead him to the reason of things which it suggested.⁶ It could not save him from making an awful mistake in his own life when once he put his trust in an unfaithful woman.⁷ Even "wisdom" with all its effectiveness is rejected.

(2) He will test the effectiveness of self-satisfaction when pushed to its utmost limit.⁸ This he had a good opportunity to do, for he had all that heart could wish.⁹ Some of these pleasures were noble and worthy, others were frivolous and sensual. But after the entire round had been run, all were found to be wanting. The attempt to give oneself full swing in material enjoyments did not satisfy.¹⁰ Closely connected with this line of thought was his observation of the emptiness of the search for and enjoyment of riches. No one sleeps any better if as well for their acquisition ;¹¹ they often injure instead of benefit ;¹² worse than all when one has amassed them, he is often snatched away before he can enjoy them.¹³

(3) In the course of his observation one thing has caught the eye of Koheleth. Everything has its destined time for coming and going, growing and dying. Nature and the world are full of opportune moments.¹⁴ What if man yielding up the search for the reason of things, could find and seize the opportunity or opportunities which God has destined to make his life worthy and satisfactory. What if he should get in touch with the great machine ? Man is evidently made to be in tune with the universe. Everything is beautiful in its time and the human reaches out and apprehends the beauty of the world.¹⁵ But however this may be, man cannot hope to find and seize the opportunity, to realize the beauty.¹⁶

(4) Will not what is commonly called "success" be a suitable basis for happiness ? The difficulty is that the successful man is hated by his envious neighbor, and success costs too much at that price.¹⁷ May not social fellowship be available ? Isolation is a most prolific source of misery while companionship is ever more profitable.¹⁸ Yet the wise youth who associated himself with the people and gained a crown, lost it as speedily and sank into oblivion.¹⁹ Certainly the friendship of human kind is rare. Woman's love has proved a delusion.²⁰

¹ 1:16-18. ² 7:1-29; 8:1-7. ³ 7:1-4. ⁴ 7:19; 8:1. ⁵ 7:25. ⁶ 7:23, 24.
⁷ 7:26-29. ⁸ 2:1-7. ⁹ 2:7,9,10. ¹⁰ 2:2,11. ¹¹ 5:10-12. ¹² 5:13,14. ¹³ 6:1,2.
¹⁴ 3:1-8. ¹⁵ 3:11a. ¹⁶ 3:11b. ¹⁷ 4:4-6. ¹⁸ 4:7-12. ¹⁹ 4:13-16. ²⁰ 7:26-29.

(5) Will Koheleth throw all scruples aside and plunge into vice? Wisdom has taught him the folly and danger of that course. It is at this point that his profound belief in God comes out clearly. However great the anomalies of life, one thing is certain, that "it shall not be well with the wicked."¹

(6) He has not refused to seek for the help he needs in the popular religion of the day.² The features of it as described and suggested by him are most in accord with that legal and ritual religion which Ezra introduced. It has degenerated from its early prime into a timid, anxious performance of rites and scrupulous offering of tribute and vows to God, and on the other hand into a selfish calculating spirit which is willing to cheat him. Koheleth allows the power and significance of religion, but spurns its spurious counterfeits and casts the popular faith and worship, the legalism of the time, after the other rejected suitors.

(7) There is one other solace remaining which religionists of the day are hailing as a new discovery. If one cannot enjoy this life there is another to come, and the hope of a happy *immortality* brightens the dreary waste of this vain world. But this, too, Koheleth cannot accept. He sees no evidence of it in the earth. Here his pessimism touches its lowest point and the dreary song of forgetfulness in death and darkness in the grave echoes solemnly again and again throughout the book.³ Man and beast are alike, they go unto one place. We do not know the future. The dead remember nothing, "there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave." It is true that in the last chapter⁴ the dust and the spirit of man part company, yet the statement must be interpreted in accordance with the general tone of the book. There is no hope of immortality.

7. *The Solution finally Accepted.* Ecclesiastes is by no means a merely negative and sceptical book. It offers, along with its rejection of many of the great hopes which men have thought satisfying, its own contribution to the problem. This solution is not reached at the end, it appears again and again throughout the chapters, and is emphasized in opposition to the various unsatisfactory theories which are set up. It has a two-fold character,—one might almost say, a manward and a Godward side; perhaps better, a material and a spiritual element.

(1) Over against vain searching for the reason of things and empty striving after that which brings no comfort in its acquisition, the Preacher commends the renunciation of all these and enjoyment of that which is one's lot and portion in life. "Find satisfaction in that which it falls to you to do and receive," is his oft-repeated refrain. Whatever it be, it is to be accepted as from God and to be enjoyed with joy and gladness.⁵ The spirit recoils on

¹ 8:12,13. ² 5:1-7. ³ 1:11; 2:16; 2:19; 3:3,19,21,22*b*; 4:16; 6:6; 7:14; 8:7,10; 9:2,5,6,10; 11:8. ⁴ 11:7. ⁵ 2:24; 3:12,13,22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9,10.

itself, learning, after all its weary profitless round of travel over the earth, that happiness is found at its own door. The conclusion to which Koheleth has arrived is not materialistic as has been superficially thought. The essence of his thought is not the eating, the drinking and the rejoicing, but the fact that man may at least know this, that what does come to him, the labor that is given him to do, is *from God*. In view of that fact he may rejoice, he can rejoice, believing as he does in the divine providence. Yet even here Koheleth does not set great store by his solution. After having offered his modest remedy he adds, yet "this also is vanity and a striving after wind." He recognizes that the element of earthly material activity entering in makes even this not entirely satisfactory. Nothing commends his moral sanity and his wise insight more than this frank confession. Life cannot be summed up successfully and satisfyingly where material things form a part of the scheme.

(2) Hence he adds one more word which rounds out and elevates his philosophy. It, too, appears more than once in his discussion. It is simply this—*Fear God*.¹ At the end of his vain attempt to find satisfaction in the popular religion, he turns to that which lies at the basis of all religion which is to endure as strength to the heart of man. The scribe who appended the postscript to his book, rightly grasped the profoundest lesson of the Preacher when he gathered all up into what was to him "the end of the matter, 'Fear God'" — though with the true spirit of a scribe he added what Koheleth had rejected—"and keep his commandments."² This is the deepest and truest word that Koheleth has for us. There is not much enthusiasm or inspiration for the superficial hearer in this motto, but it has been the hope and strength of thoughtful and sober workers in many generations.

8. *The religious Value of Ecclesiastes*. The book cannot be called one of the attractive books of the Old Testament. To many it is almost repulsive. The Jewish church was divided respecting it. The Christian finds its tone far below, and its outlook far narrower than, the teachings of the gospel of him who "brought life and immortality to light." Still many noble men are enrolled among its students and admirers and there are elements in it which make it of permanent value to the moral and religious teaching of mankind.

(1) As long as there is suffering and oppression in the world and the divine justice and love are overlaid and lost in the confusion of human struggle, passion and sorrow, so long will Ecclesiastes continue to appeal to men. There is a pessimistic element in life. He who builds up his theory of humanity without it, will find that he has a defective theory. Undue optimism is in

¹ 5:7; 7:18; 8:12.

² Koheleth rejected this addition in so far as it represented the ideas of the popular legal religion of his day, which hedged up the way of life with prohibitions and scribal rules claiming divine authority.

the end as weak and worthless as undue pessimism. These dark things of human existence did not go out of sight with the "year of our Lord." They are permanent facts, reappearing in social and individual life, and must be reckoned with. Koheleth bids us never overlook or slight them in marking out our pathway in the world.

(2) Koheleth himself is no mean man as he writes himself down before us. Above all things else he is thoroughly honest with himself and with the facts. He will see the worst, not glossing over manifest evils, not soothing himself with what he knows to be unsatisfying. He stands out nobly beside the religion of his time, which was only too ready to use any means to get its followers out of trouble, whether those means were fair or foul, true or false. Upon the highest truth of all that came within the range of his observation, the doctrine of immortality, he sadly but firmly turns his back. It is not for him, for he cannot make himself believe it. Intellectual and spiritual honesty and sincerity are taught on every page of Ecclesiastes.

(3) Because Koheleth was honest with himself, because he renounced every fair-seeming scheme which could not satisfy, he has struck out for us so many fruitful truths and stirred so many thoughtful minds to deeper reflection. He has therefore left on record for us, a testimony to the value of "honest doubt." If he had been satisfied with the intellectual presuppositions of the scribal doctrine and the ritual practices of the popular religion, we would have suffered the loss of a body of stimulating thought which we could ill afford to lose, and he would have fallen short of those high truths which finally braced his soul for the battle of life. Earnest skepticism is always near the fountain of truth. The skeptics of one age have been more than once the prophets of the age to come.

(4) Just as doubt is often the fruitful source of the discovery of truth, so is dissatisfaction the beginning of a search which leads into a higher and more enduring satisfaction. Such was Koheleth's experience. What if he had sunk back into the unmeaning forms of the temple-worship of his day, the round of observances which was the sum of religion! It was his unwillingness to stop short of a true and satisfying goal that led him on so far in his search. This is an elemental and uplifting fact of experience and nowhere has it a better illustration than in the book of Ecclesiastes.

(5) The two-fold conclusion to which Koheleth came still has its teaching for us. A life of renunciation and quietness, lived in the fear of God, how that contrasts with the hurry and worry of our present age! In investigation we need to be reminded that not all things are for us to know. The present generation may well cultivate a healthful agnosticism with Koheleth than to wear its heart out beating against the walls of unattainable truth. Both in practical life and in mental and spiritual exertion, it is no mistake from time to time to listen for his quiet, cool, impassioned word, Fear God, accept thy portion from him of labor, rejoice in it and be glad. "Be not righteous over-much; neither make thyself over wise."

Such a book as this was needed in the Sacred Library to meet and satisfy the mood of mind and heart into which all thoughtful persons at times fall, and out of which so much wisdom may be drawn, if one will but follow Koheleth to the end, and press on further to the higher light and fuller life for which he looked, but to which he could not attain.¹

¹ There are several excellent helps for the study of the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Commentary on Ecclesiastes in the Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges is written by the late Dean Plumptre, and, though a comparatively small volume, is one of the best commentaries on any biblical book in the language. Canon Cheyne in "Job and Solomon, or the Wisdom of the Old Testament," gives one hundred pages (pp. 199-301) to Koheleth, written in his usual clear, somewhat discursive and wordy, but yet instructive, fashion. Driver's "Introduction" (pp. 436-449) packs a large amount of information into a brief space. The few pages given to Ecclesiastes in Kuenen's "Religion of Israel," vol. iii. pp. 90-95, are most profitable in suggestion, worth many volumes of other men. The article "Ecclesiastes" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is also helpful.